



A Conversation With Kansas City's Kelly Kuhn, Director Of Blue Gallery

Eileen G'Sell Mar 3, 2017

On an ethereal spring-like February afternoon, the Crossroads Arts District boasts a serene bustle that seems ever so Kansas City, where the renowned Blue Gallery has established itself. While presenting the polish of the traditional “white cube,” the space is sunnier, more open; Stella, the gallery’s pensive rescue dog, greets me at the door. Owner and director Kelly Kuhn approaches, with a style that reads old-school Madonna meets Botticelli noble, in accord with the mix of edge and elegance, beauty and provocation of the work that lines the walls.

For 16 years, Kuhn has helmed Blue Gallery from a humble startup to the vigorous exhibition space and business it is today. Over glasses of sparkling grapefruit La Croix, we talked fashion, First Fridays and the perks of being an outlier. The following is an excerpt of our conversation.



How did your art history background and rapid business edification combine to make this space possible? What are your influences—both conventional and otherwise?

I definitely identify as an outlier in the art scene. I never dreamed that this would be a possibility for me. But it's always been something that has kept me alive and inspired. I can't afford to have the collection that I want, but the next best thing is to encourage and foster that for people who can. It's a profound pleasure to get to experience that.

I was raised in northern Minnesota, which definitely fostered a scrappier mentality, a fight for beauty. There's something intense about the landscape up there; you're constantly fighting for whatever beauty you can carve out because nature is relentless about wanting to take over. When you find beauty, there can be this real stubbornness to hang onto it.

But I believe that art is for everyone. Being the outlier and having this belief has put me in a good place in terms of identifying with clients. My number one type of client isn't necessarily looking for the trophy piece that will wow everybody. It's more of an intimate connection that our clients have with the work that they get from us. Personalities attract similar personalities. What sets me apart from my arts colleagues in the area—and nationwide—has also given me an advantage. I have very loyal clients who trust that I'm not going to push them into something to make the sale, but that I'm really looking out for their collection.

Do you have any favorite sales—any specific ones that filled your heart with joy?

There have been a lot. It's been 16 years here, but 24 total of selling. But one of the first sales that really stands out was with the woman who helped me with a business plan for this gallery. She started off as a collector, and wandered into the gallery I was working at in the Plaza. She saw this piece by William Rainey—this abstract piece, and she was apprehensive about pulling the trigger. And so I said, "Go, get a cup of coffee, think about it, sleep on it if you need to. Let it haunt you. Because then you'll know." She later told me that meant so much to her that I wasn't trying to hard-sell her. She came back and bought the piece, and continued to buy more pieces that she loves. A friendship ensued as a result—a cherished one, at that.

Another collector—also a fan of Rainey—has a gorgeous property in Hong Kong. He comes in on a regular basis and buys a lot of art. He has enough money to buy the most amazing artwork he can find in the world. But he loves to buy from us. Which is amazing.

You'll also notice that there's not a lot of redundancy with the type of work that I show. I'm really trying to let each artist cover their own genre and style on their own.

When you were growing up, what catalyzed your interest in the art world?

Actually, I think it was Vogue!

That's fascinating.

I grew up in a town that is a tourist town in a way. It's a beautiful town, even in winter. But it's definitely hunters and hockey players and all this stuff that I'm not at all interested in. My mother and I would go into the grocery store together, and it was almost a cultural outing! There were no art galleries at all. She would say, "You can pick out a magazine." And it was always Vogue, which to this day I'm intrigued with. It was a window to a much more cultural, fantastic place—there was this whimsy, this space that was rich in imagination. It was an outlet. The thing I could point to the most that got me here.

As far as how you go about finding artists, how much of what you show is from you going out and noticing great artists versus receiving submissions?

I represent about 42 artists, give or take. I do go out and look and approach. But the majority these days approach me. I don't have the time to constantly be searching. KOLLABS [Anke Schofield and Luis Garcia-Nerey] are an example of artists who approached me and are actually represented at galleries throughout the nation.

We have a really good national reputation—in part because of our clientele, and how we handle our clientele. But also our artists. We honor our partnerships and treat them with respect. Not the cliché of artists being taken advantage of. About 95 percent of those who submit their work are not ready to show yet. What keeps me up at night are the artists who are too timid to submit, but are sitting on this amazing artwork.

How many shows do you have a year?

About six formal shows, and several informal shows. I try to rehang the gallery every thirty days. The “wonder wall” features work for \$500 or less, and a lot of artists want to try to fit that wall. That’s something not a lot of galleries do.

Kansas City is one of my favorite Midwestern cities. How has the city shaped your ambitions here?

I went to the University of Missouri, Kansas City and met my husband there. It was definitely wasn't by design. The challenge in the Midwest is that there can be an insecurity about taking a gamble and doing something really avant-garde. Sometimes I'll bring in a really exciting artist, when I want my clientele to have fun and play with their environment. But sometimes people really want to play it safe, not recognizing how much artwork can really change everything. More than a couch, or chairs, or a rug. Art can really speak to the occupant of the space, and really tell the world who they are.

My desire is that when clients find themselves falling in love with something, to really honor that. It's sacred. It's funny, but I have a hard time falling in love with a piece and then walking away from it—at a museum or anywhere I go. There's this intense longing for me, so when people are able to walk away, it's a real head-scratcher for me. Especially when it's not a money issue.



You're adamant about art being available to everyone. What challenges has Blue Gallery faced to make that happen?

For 16 years, we've been a major participant in First Friday art crawls in the neighborhood. And we were one of the few galleries, in the early days, that was open all year round. As a result, people could rely on First Fridays and know there would be some doors open. And so it has grown. We have attracted thousands to the neighborhood and have clocked about two hundred First Fridays. One time in an earlier location, my husband Dave counted nearly five thousand people walking through the door. It was an intense night.

This neighborhood has become kind of gentrified as a result. It's a sexy neighborhood to live in. Apartments are going up all over the place—and they're doing well. But we don't do First Fridays because we want an art sale. This is an opportunity for people to experience it with the softness of a large crowd. And sometimes there's bad behavior that comes with that. In July, I had a beautiful exhibition up for William Rainey, and we're all keeping an eye on the crowd, and we saw people touching the artwork. The next day we noticed footprints on the wall. It seemed like people were taking the experience for granted. And meanwhile, there's a gallery that's suggesting doing a "members-only" policy. As much as it broke my heart to see people taking us for granted, it's not my brand to lock my doors, potentially turning away not only clients, but people coming in and experiencing art for themselves.

In part, I was thinking about *myself*. I've always been that girl—when I was an art student, for instance—who would go into the galleries, wide-eyed and just full of questions, with no money to buy, and certainly wasting the director's time. The idea of turning someone like that away is an absolute "no" for me. This art is for everyone, and that's what I really believe.

You mentioned earlier your female client who also mentored you from the business end. Much has been said about the lack of ready mentors for female entrepreneurs. Who else has mentored you?

Certainly. Sherry Leedy Contemporary is a gallery that has been in the neighborhood since the 1980s. Sherry—whether she knows it or not—was a mentor to me. Just knowing she existed, visiting her gallery, reading reviews and articles, whatever I could find at the time. Myra Morgan is another one—she died in the early 2000s. She had a gallery in the Farmer's Market called Morgan Gallery, and she was also an indirect mentor. I had these references for women in business, and that's all that I really needed. I had a good friends and mentors who said, "You should do it."

What are you excited about now?

One of the things I love, love, love is that clients are hiring me more and more to curate their personal collections. I'm doing that for corporations, as well. This is a service that I do offer, no matter how small the collection, and even if a person hasn't bought anything from me, I come in and can usually identify where things need to go and how they need to relate to each other.

I don't know what the future holds. It may turn into something where I'm the curator for private and corporate collections. But as far as my lust for more dynamic artists in the gallery itself—that just doesn't go away. There's always an ache for this type of art, that type of artist. There's an artist from New Orleans named Ashley Longshore who does pop, fun, irreverent work, whom I've been stalking for a while. I'm acutely aware of how much better my gallery can be.

Well, sometimes those who are the most critical also go the farthest—because they can see what's missing, what can still be achieved.

What drives me most is being an outlier. Also not wanting to exclude people, and honoring people who want to have a one-on-one experience with an artwork. Cliques and the whole mob mentality make me nervous. So I come at this whole experience from that perspective.